
Under the Fluorescent Sun

Chad Peelle

His face was bright, pink around the edges, a violent, sharp, hateful pink. His eyes gleamed with an eerie happiness that was artificial; not fake, but certainly not real. His hair was spiked and looked as if it might reach out and try to stab me. He was never a real friend; we just used each other. On this day he laughed in my face and tormented me, especially when I wasn't looking. I knew he was doing it. I knew he wanted something bad to happen to me. I knew he was out to get me. I was just with him because it was the normal thing to do. And he gave me drugs. I wanted to get high on the weed we were smoking, but I couldn't.

You can't get high on pot, even the really good shit, when you're trippin' balls on acid.

The world had begun growing orange and yellow and brighter than the normal noon sky midway through the day, just after my last day of 11th grade, my junior year of high school. I spent that half-day at school obsessing about finding a chemical answer to a spiritual dilemma. I couldn't bear celebrating the beginning of summer without the proper substances to take one to an enlightened understanding of the true meaning of celebration. That day at school was the last time I'd be in a classroom for two and a half years.

The years seemed to be falling off. Life was disintegrating before my eyes, or maybe behind them. I had lost all contact with the outside world. I wasn't allowed to listen to the radio, couldn't watch television, and my

family had agreed to a rule the treatment center set which didn't allow me to speak with them.

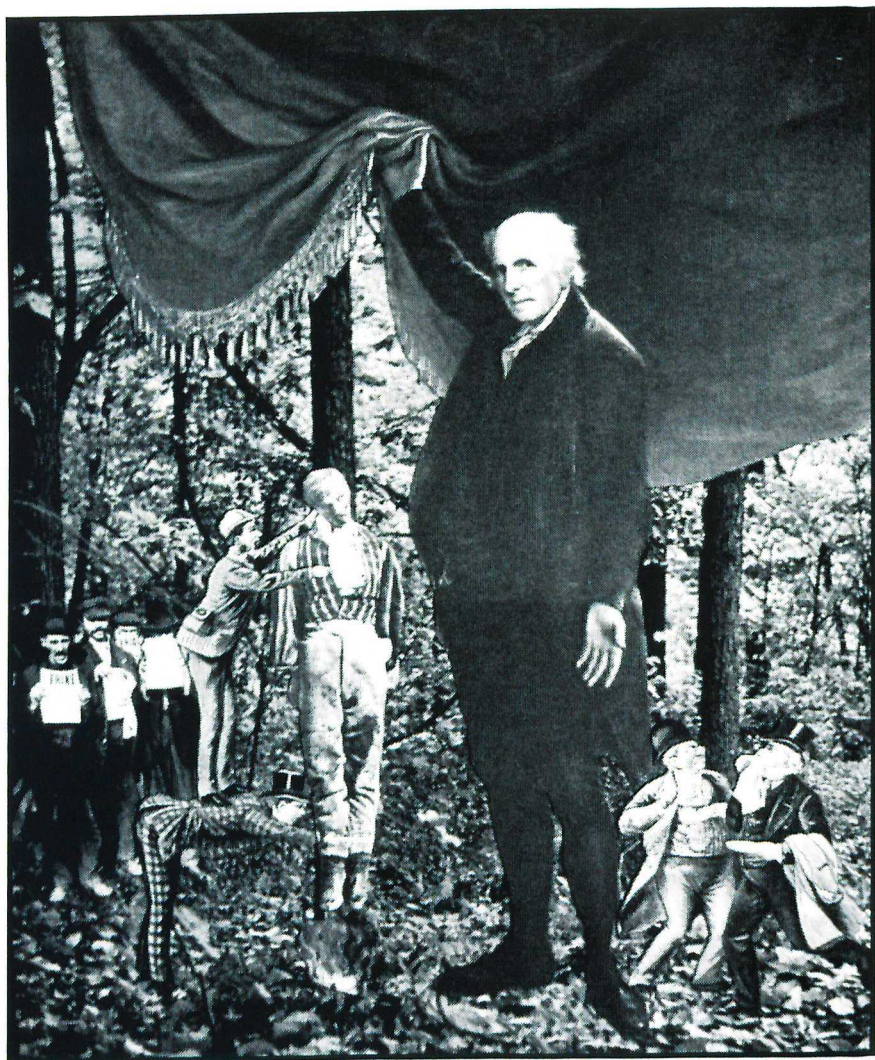
All those times I said I wanted and needed help, I didn't mean this. I didn't mean life-altering, restrictive help that robs me of my personal freedoms and humbles me. I wanted the type of help that would take only a little while, just to put me back on track. This help was too scary.

The fluorescent lights had done me in. I was okay for a while, but the oppression of those lights wore me down, day by day, and by the time I had been there for six months I was ready to break. Not that I hadn't broken before. But this was the nuclear meltdown. This was the cry-out-to-god-i-am-dying breakdown.

I found myself lying face down on my stomach, pinned to the floor by peers and adults. I had tried to hurt them. I tried to bite them, scratch them, pull them, punch them, and kick them. And I had tried to run away. Now here I was, hogtied, spit and snot-covered face against the brittle carpet, crying and screaming, screaming, screaming.

My head was screaming. I couldn't find answers to all the questions within it. Everything seemed wrong. Someone had replaced the world with this alternate, fucked up version where the sky seemed to curl and swirl and bend and threatened to eventually break and fall all over me in pieces.

I was chugging orange juice to boost the acid buzz at lunch time and took the two other hits because nothing was kicking in. An hour later, the world had been replaced and started to turn in on itself, seemingly storing up all of its energy to attack me.



Under the Curtain

Andrew Wright

I walked the town in a hazy daze, drifting streets with names I had forgotten. Friends' faces seemed lost in the late afternoon fading sunlight. I didn't recognize anyone and couldn't find where I was supposed to go. That's when the pink man showed up.

He treated me better than Daniel. Daniel had all but spit on me, embarrassed to be with a chubby kid who couldn't handle his drugs. I always looked up at him with weak, round eyes, then turned my head down. I strived for better. I looked away from his cold, harsh face later that summer when he criticized me for cutting my hair. I wanted to be him, to touch what he was inside, to channel his energy into my own version of cool.

But cool was dangerous.

I was cooler with the pink man, Evan. And so we rode away in his car. He kept asking me questions. I couldn't answer them. At one point I couldn't form a single word with my mouth. I pulled and pulled at my brain and couldn't find words to speak. My lips and tongue were fighting with me, perhaps afraid of what I might do or say next.

I remembered that I left my paycheck in Daniel's car. I remembered I had to go to work at five. It all came back to me at once and I could speak again and the world was rushing at me like a storm through a peninsula. My tongue was fast and I was loud and Evan rushed to get me to Daniel to get my paycheck.

Daniel looked at me like I had just won some dubious contest that was more worthy of disgust or pity than glory. He looked at me like I was a child. He looked at me as if I created a hassle just being in his presence. I looked down toward the ground.

By the time I made it to work the world had begun its attack, slowly swarming around me, creeping in on me like a small room with walls that shrink and edge closer and closer together, soon to squish any occupant.

I wanted out of that room. I had been in it for so long it was hard to remember when I hadn't been in it. It was hard to remember anything but pain those days. The therapists reminded me daily of the things I had done and I was tired of facing how horrible of a person I was. I wanted out and only knew one way.

"PLEASE JUST LET ME FUCKING DIE!" I screamed, still being held down. They tried comforting me, consoling me, calming me down. I couldn't see the hope they promised. "JUST LET GO OF ME SO I CAN GO KILL MYSELF! LET ME GO! LET ME GO!" They didn't.

Spit flew from my teeth and lips and tongue as I fought against their stronghold, determined to find my exit. It tasted thick and angry, like my stomach wanted to bring back my lunch. The carpet my face lay against was mostly blue with flecks of maroon and yellow and white and green scattered throughout. People around me were crying, though I couldn't understand why and didn't care who they were.

One said, "I hate this fucking disease," through thick tears in a whiny voice. There he goes, calling this shit a disease. I think I called him a faggot. Oh well. Better to be a fag than a freak.

I was freaking out. That five hour shift at the Old Trail, a locally owned and operated restaurant there in Pendleton, Indiana, was the longest of my life. I normal-

ly spent my shift washing dishes for about two and a half hours, smoking weed for an hour, a half hour stealing from the waitresses' tip jars, a half hour dedicated to sitting and talking with my co-"workers," and a half hour devoted to eating the food I always stole.

This five hour shift was a unique one. I drowned myself in my work the whole time. I washed the dishes with scalding hot water, the steam rising up and around me. I hoped to use it to protect myself, maybe even make myself invisible, from the rest of the world.

The times I had to walk through the restaurant I was sure I was doomed. The old crowd gawked at me and I knew they wanted to and soon would pounce on me and rip me to shreds. The world was a cartoon and I was Bugs fuckin' Bunny.

My eyes were pasted wide open, my mouth dry and unknowing.

The waitresses gave me their pathetic looks and wondered if they should tell the boss about the fucked up loser in the kitchen. They decided not to.

Decisions had gotten me here.

I had decided to fuck away my level change. I had gotten to "Second Level" and gone home for the first time in six months. The house was different. It was intrusive, dark, cold, lonely. It wasn't home. I came back to the building and edged my way back to "First Level" over the next three weeks.

On a Friday night I smashed a chair and threatened to hurt everyone in the room.

They sent me to the hospital, my second time in less than three months. I spent a week there, this time different than the last. The last time I had eased through

without a mistake, convincing everyone that I was a knight -- no, a prince -- No! A God.

This time they stuck me in a room by myself and expected me to change. Instead I decided to drag my fingernails into my inner forearm and rip away my own flesh. The physical sensation -- hot, fierce, dry -- sent away the burning knowledge of my need to change and that sense of being all alone in this world.

One day they gave me some Thorazine. It was a smart staff. Give Thorazine to a drug addict and maybe he'll behave. Hey, at least the little fucker'll sleep for a good long time instead of calling all the nurses bitches and cunts.

This cunt kept talking to me like I was an idiot. She, a waitress, looked at me sadly, her eyebrows raised in the middle like a mom who has exhausted every method of punishment and just wants her son to behave. Suddenly I got it. She knew. She knew it all. They all knew it all. I was trapped in a world where everyone knew but me. I was locked away in this corner, steam surrounding me and the world disappearing as much as God would permit it. I wanted to escape down that drain with the scorching water. I was tired of being the show, the cartoon. My feet had grown heavy like the animator had purposely drawn me with clown shoes which would weigh me down, sink me into the ground, and destroy my chances of walking out of this alive.

At least I was still alive. Sometimes I thought that was a good thing. Other times, well, those other times I reached for the gun I didn't have.

Maybe if I had a gun I could shoot myself out of

here. Because I knew that I wasn't going to be able to just walk out. The acid had convinced me that I was stuck here forever. I wanted to be free from this ugly, lively, too-bright world and to come down from this horrible drug that had poisoned my thinking into a wedge of sanity and a whole pie of lunacy.

I tried hard, for a long time, to convince myself that I was crazy. At least then I'd have an excuse to give up. Then I could become a vegetable. I wanted them to give me a lobotomy, but they refused.

Somehow, no one refused to let me go. Somehow I got out of there that night. They shut everything down like normal and I rode home in my father's car in silence. The world was still breathing, still soaking into my bones and the night was overcrowded with light. I said nothing and looked down. The first thing I thought about the next day was how I could get some more acid.

I felt like the acid from almost a year ago was still ripping at the nerves in my brain.

I could feel my pulse as I stood and issued my apology to the people who had to witness my fits of violence, both outward and self-inflicted.

I could feel my red, saturated blood swishing through the arteries and veins of my face as I urged another kid to fight me.

I could feel life growing inside of me as I turned that heavy corner called change and felt some sort of natural light again...called hope.